

Utopias from Asia

Santiniketan, 16 – 17 November 2011

Report on the symposium

by Dr. Sonja Wengoborski

The international and interdisciplinary Symposium ‘Utopias from Asia’ took place in memoriam Momoyo Okura, on the occasion of the 150th Birthday Anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, in the Art Centre of the Santiniketan Society of Visual Art and Design. It was organized by the Institute of Indology of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, in collaboration with Asiaticum: Society for the Promotion of Studies East and West, the Visva Bharati University, and the Art Centre of the Santiniketan Society of Visual Art and Design, India.

The symposium was opened by the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, Prof. Dr. Udaya Narayana Singh, who, in an exquisite speech, took the occasion to point out some fundamentals of the concept of utopia in general and on Tagore’s utopian references in particular. He also read a greeting address of Prof. Sushanta Duttagupta, the Vice-Chancellor of Visva Bharati University. The inauguration ceremony was moderated by Prof. Dr. Swati Ganguly (Visva Bharati University). Dr. Martin Wälde, the director of the Goethe-Institute Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata, delivered an address. Messages of greeting by R. Schmiedchen, the Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Kolkata, another one by the Directorate-General Cultural Heritage Rhineland-Palatinate, represented by Thomas Metz, the Director-General, and Ingeborg Hoffstadt, administration manager, and one by Andrea Kaiser, chairperson of the German Indian Round Table (GIRT), Frankfurt, were read out.

In his opening address, Prof. Dr. Konrad Meisig, director of the Institute of Indology of the Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, and first chair-person of the ASIATICUM, underlined that the symposium was in accordance with the ideas and wishes of the Japanese entrepreneur Mrs. Momoyo Okura, a committed sponsor of international humanities and cultural studies. He mentioned that the Indian poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore stayed as a guest in the house of the Okura family for the period of one month during the second of his five visits to Japan. The present symposium on ‘Utopias from Asia’ was the second in a series of international

cultural symposia, the first of which took place on 1st-2nd September 2009 in Mainz, Germany. Its papers have been published under the German title 'Die Zukunft des Wissens' (i. e. 'the future of knowledge'), in 2011. Dr. Martin Kämpchen (Santiniketan) introduced the German speaking audience into Tagore's lyrics and read from his own translations, some of which have recently been published in Germany on the occasion of the 150th birthday anniversary of the poet.

According to Rabindranath Tagore science and art are an inseparable whole. So it was quite in accordance with the Tagorean tradition that in the evening of the first day the Tagore dance drama 'Valmiki Pratibha', arranged by Dr. Amartya Mukherjee, was performed by students of the Visva Bharati University. The script of this play can be found in the Bengali original on the website of the Okura Institute for the Study of Spiritual Culture (<http://okuraken.or.jp/tagore>).

Papers were presented by twelve scholars from India, Japan, Vietnam and Germany: In the first session, chaired by Dr. Martin Kämpchen (Santiniketan), Prof. Dr. Swati Ganguly (Visva Bharati University) spoke on 'The Santiniketan 'ashram' and Visva Bharati: Utopia beyond nationalist frames'. She showed the development of Tagore's ideas on education and their realization in founding a university as an alternative to the British model, supporting her deliberations by historical photographs of the site. Dr. Kasturi Dadhe (Mainz) introduced the audience into the both remarkable as well as exceptional life, work and achievements of a Bengal woman writer who lived by the end of 19th/ beginning of 20th century: 'The concept of a feminine-self: veiled and unveiled, in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream', 'Padmarag' and 'Abarodhbasini''.

The second session was chaired by Prof. Dr. Swati Ganguly. Dr. habil. Luong Van Ke (Hanoi) gave some insights into trends of development in Vietnam in his presentation on the topic: 'From Utopia to Reality: Some Experiences on Political Transformation in Viet Nam'. Dr. habil. Marcus Stiglegger (Siegen) spoke on 'Kaiju eiga: Utopias and Anti-utopias in Japanese Cinema', underlining his findings on the genre of 'Kaiju' ('strange beast') movies with examples drawn from classics such as the international renowned 'Godzilla' (1954).

The third session, chaired by Dr. Ivo Ritzer (Mainz), began with Dr. Sonja Wengoborski (Mainz) on modern Hindi, Singhalese and English literature: 'Exploring the space between the possible and the impossible: 'Observations from contemporary South Asian literature''. As Prof. Masako Sato (Tokyo) was unable to attend personally, her paper on 'Seeking Utopia beyond the Modernization – A Movement in the Asian Structural Change in the 20th Century' was presented by Dr. Kasturi Dadhe, supported by Prof. Dr. Konrad Meisig. It underlined that thanks to the dedication of Yoko Okura-Mieli the whole literary work of Rabindranath Tagore, 160 books in Bengali and English, that had been presented to Kunihiko Okura (1882-1971) to thank the Okura family for the care they gave him during his stay, have recently been digitized and can be accessed online on the above mentioned website of the Okura Institute for the Study of Spiritual Culture (URL as above). Prof. Dr. Kumkum Bhattacharya (Visva Bharati University) spoke on 'Utopia in praxis', that is the realization of Tagorean ideas and ideals in Santiniketan and neighboring Sriniketan. Dr. Marion Meisig (Mainz) communicated her paper on 'Unity of Politics and Nature – The Appearance of the Mythical Beast Qilin in China', illustrated by pictures of skillful designed representations.

Dr. habil. Marcus Stiglegger chaired the last session, beginning with Dr. Ivo Ritzer on 'Ninkyō Eiga: Yakuzas, Knights and Utopias of Chivalry in Japanese Cinema', dealing with Utopian features in the genre of Japanese chivalrous film, that typically is characterized by its hero's deep conflict between giri (social responsibility) and ninjō (personal inclination). On 'Rabindranath Tagore's Utopia Visualized in his Paintings' Prof. Soumik Nandi Majumdar (Visva Bharati University) presented the audience insights on the artist's experiments in painting, an aspect of his oeuvre he himself kept rather excluded from public viewing in favor of his writing. The last paper was presented by Prof. Dr. Konrad Meisig (Mainz) focusing on four examples of 'Buddhist Utopias' drawn from different time periods as well as geographical regions of Asia.

After a final discussion that highlighted the interdisciplinary character of this conference, Prof. Swaty Ganguly (Visva Bharati University) uttered in her concluding remarks her contention that this symposium was quite in accordance with Tagore's ideas, and that Tagore himself would happily have attended.